

Contending Modernities

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Nahdlatul Ulama: good governance and religious tolerance in Indonesia

JANUARY 15, 2013

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Notwithstanding its considerable contribution to Indonesian politics and cultures, Nahdlatul Ulama (which literally means the “awakening of religious scholars”), Indonesia’s largest Islamic organization, has been poorly understood in the West. While most Western political commentators and policy makers absorb an almost daily dose of news or intelligence regarding Islamist extremist organizations or terrorist groups in the predominantly Muslim countries of the Middle East and Southeast Asia, there is far less information and understanding of Muslim peacemakers, moderate-progressive groups, and organizations that advocate for tolerance and pluralism. Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) is one of the world’s foremost Muslim associations devoted to the spread of the Islamic message of justice, peace, and tolerance.

Established in 1926, NU today has a membership of more than 50 million. Founded as a critical reaction to the growth of Indonesia’s Wahhabi reformist and modernist groups, which were attempting to shrink Indonesian Muslim, practices of locally inspired religious traditions, cultures, and knowledge, NU developed a reputation as the guardian of traditions – both classical Islamic traditions of knowledge, and local traditions and cultures. Accordingly, NU has been dubbed a “traditionalist Islamic organization”—a label that can be easily misconstrued. Indeed, NU serves as one of Indonesia’s leading Muslim institutions dedicated to the protection and attainment not only of traditional values and practices of Islam, but also citizenship, democratic civility, inter-group conciliation, religious tolerance, and the public good. In this regard, NU is traditional and modern, conservative and progressive alike.

ABOUT CONTENDING MODERNITIES

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Defending pluralism

Since its founding, NU has conducted numerous large-scale national meetings aimed at evaluating contemporary political, social, and religious trends, and recommending paths forward to policy makers on ways of addressing problems facing both state and society. Attended by thousands of NU members, sympathizers, and *Ulama* or *Kiai* (a Javanese term for Muslim clerics and scholars, notably linked to NU), such meetings have provided the organization a platform from which to persuade state and society actors, religious and secular alike, to defend the country's national pluralist ideology (*Pancasila*). NU also embraces the national constitution (UUD 1945) as the foundation of nationhood and ethno-religious brotherhood.

In a recent national gathering, *Konferensi Besar Nahdlatul Ulama* (the Great Conference of NU) recently held in the city of Cirebon in West Java, for example, NU issued a number of *fatwas* and recommendations concerning religious issues, inter-group relations, and public affairs facing today's Indonesian societies.

Such advocacy on the part of a respected Islamic organization like NU is necessary for the common good. Since the collapse of Suharto's New Order dictatorial regime, the archipelago has weathered a wave of small but militant trans-national Islamist groups which have attempted to impose the implementation of Islamic ideology and *Shari'a* (Islamic Law) as a replacement for Pancasila and UUD 1945, which they considered as secular, Western style, and "un-Islamic." For NU, however, both Pancasila and UUD 1945, which guarantee freedom of religion and association for all Indonesian citizens regardless of their ethno-religious affiliations, are regarded as Islamic and suitable for Indonesian cultures and societies due to their roots in Islamic teachings, discourses, and practices of pacification. NU also points to the cultural grounding of these founding documents within Indonesia's rich traditions of tolerance and cooperation.

Indonesian archipelago: "pluralist endowments"

The Indonesian archipelago, once described by historian Denys Lombard as having been blessed with an abundance of "pluralist endowments," is home to the ancient philosophy of *bhinneka tunggal ika* ("oneness amid diversity"), which later became an official national motto of Indonesia. This philosophy inspired the founding fathers of Indonesia to create the inclusive state ideology of Pancasila and the state constitution, UUD 1945. NU leaders such as Syaikh Hasyim Ash'ari, K.H. Wahab Chasbullah, K.H.A. Wahid Hasyim worked hand-in-hand with secular nationalists, both Muslims and non-Muslims, to create a public culture of citizenship and establish a political basis for a deeply plural society in the newly established nation-state of Indonesia. Embracing the ideology of Pancasila, they challenged reformist and Islamist aspirations of establishing an Islamic

state in the country – a legacy that continues today through NU’s defense of pluralism and the constitution.

Struggling for good governance

NU has historically pressed Indonesian political elites and government officials to move beyond procedural democracy, and to embrace a “substantial democracy” that is typified by freedom from “money politics” or *risywah siyasiyah* (vote buying), voluntarily participation in elections, and the pursuit of the common public goods rather than sectarian interests. Moreover, NU pushes for the government to use tax money in an appropriate manner, supporting causes such as improving education, developing the economy, and assisting the poor. NU leaders threaten that failure by the government to work towards such goals would result in the issuance of *fatwa’s* that outlaw Muslims to pay taxes. Chairman of the NU Supreme Council, K.H.M.A. Sahal Mahfudh, has argued that the primary job of the government is to “create social justice, prosperity, and global peace” as well as to “protect ethno-religious minorities.” Therefore, he has affirmed that as long as a ruler contributes to the public good society is obliged to obey the ruler, but if not “they are free from such obligation.”

The NU has historically advocated for good governance in Indonesia, a fact which is highlighted through NU’s opposition to Suharto’s authoritarian New Order. Under the leadership of K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid, who became leader in 1984, NU evolved into a religiously-inspired civil society force aimed at providing a counterbalance to the power of Suharto’s regime, and struggling for the achievement of global justice, democracy, citizenship, and freedom of religion. Despite Suharto’s tireless efforts to weaken the political influences of NU’s *Ulama*, K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid, along with other anti-New Order NU leaders, continued to resist Suharto’s regime by developing unique nonviolent models of opposition and “cultural protests.”

Protecting religious minorities

NU works together with secular and religious forces to secure religious freedom, guarantee interreligious tolerance, and to defend Indonesia’s plural ethno-religious societies from violent threats attempts posed by minority extremist groupings. This commitment to religious freedom and human rights was demonstrated through K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid’s instruction that NU’s youth wing, Banser, send its members to churches across the country in order to protect Christian places of worship and to guarantee the safety of Christians, especially during Christmas. One of the Banser’s members, Riyanto, tragically died while protecting the Eben Heizer Church in Mojokerto,

East Java, from a terrorist bomb attack in 2000. Under the leadership of K.H. Sa'id Aqiel Siradj, NU continues to send thousands of Banser members to guard churches from “extremist onslaught.”

In a world torn by conflict between competing ideologies, Indonesia “continues to produce men and women whose nonsectarian vision remains every bit as pluralistic, tolerant and spiritual as that of our founding fathers” (Bisri & Taylor, *Strategic Review*2:3, 2012). NU is just one of Indonesia’s many Muslim groupings and religious associations that are ardently devoted to extend the very fundamental teaching of Islam and the Quran as *rahmatan lil ‘alamin*—“a source of love and compassion for all humanity,” and to ensure that this message is embodied on earth.

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